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## **‘Public Feasts’: Ben Jonson as literary celebrity**

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Ben Jonson has long been acknowledged as a writer concerned with the effects of fame, but has most often been construed as a figure in conflict with the cultural processes of commercial print and performance through which he made his reputation. However, the recent discovery of an eyewitness account of his 1618 walk from London to Edinburgh shows us an author more at ease with the public gaze. This essay draws on contemporary thinking about celebrity to argue for a revision of the customary view of a Ben Jonson fighting with ill-fame, and to see him as a more active participant in the processes through which his persona was produced and circulated. This has implications for how we understand the genealogy of literary celebrity, and allows us to situate the early modern interest in, and concern with, the media or cultural production, in a longer history

Key words: Ben Jonson; fame; ‘Foot Voyage’; performance; theatre; print; reputation; persona; ill-fame.

In the summer of 1618, the eminent poet and playwright Ben Jonson embarked on a very unusual journey. He was by now established as one of England’s foremost playwrights, the dominant author of court masques, and a fine writer of non-dramatic verse. The folio *Works* published in 1616 were a formidable witness to his achievements and status. But the journey he undertook in 1618 was something of a departure, in more than one sense. Finally

implementing a plan he had first formulated at least a year previously, he set off from London on a rather lengthy walk (Bradley and Adams 1922, p. 100). His destination was Edinburgh, the capital of the native kingdom of his royal patron, James VI and I, so this was to be an excursion of more than 400 miles. It was clearly a notable journey, remarked on by contemporaries including Francis Bacon - who commented that 'he loved not to see poesy go on other feet than poetical *dactylus* and *spondaius*' (Jonson 2012, 5: p. 376; 'Informations', pp. 257-258). Jonson's sojourn in Edinburgh was to give us William Drummond's 'Informations', an extraordinary record of the traveller's views on contemporary poets and poetry, court gossip, jests, and episodes – some fairly scurrilous – from his own life. But any details of the journey itself were lost, it seemed, when Jonson's own verse narrative of his adventure went up in smoke in a 1623 desk fire – a loss publicly lamented by Jonson in a widely circulated poem (Jonson 2012, 6: pp. 171-172; 'Execration Upon Vulcan', pp. 93-95).

The loss was to some extent made good in 2009, when an account of Jonson's northwards journey was unexpectedly uncovered in a collection of family papers held at Cheshire Archives and Local Studies (Loxley 2009). An unassuming manuscript, neglected but preserved for nearly four centuries, revealed that Jonson had had a companion on his walk – probably a younger man, who refers to Jonson throughout as his 'gossip', which at this period usually denotes a relation of spiritual kinship. This companion, luckily for us, had either been charged with keeping a record or had taken it upon himself to maintain a journal of the adventure. The record, entitled 'My Gossip Jonson His Foot Voyage and Mine into Scotland', made careful note not just of the itinerary and the places visited, but also of the people whom the travellers met, their hosts, something of their entertainment, and a myriad of local details (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015).

Among all this, there is in the account a repeated emphasis on the *public* dimension of Jonson's walk. This is not just evident in the extent to which he was hosted by the civic

communities of the towns and cities through which he passed, though this is a prominent element of the narrative. Nor is it confined to the evidence of members of the social and political elite offering him very public recognition in his journey, though this too is a striking feature: Lady Mary Wroth, a noblewoman with significant court connections, publicly greeted Jonson on his arrival at Waltham Cross (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, p. 39), while he was presented with a side of venison at Pontefract, either by or on behalf of Jane Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury. Equally significant is the evidence of more obviously popular attention paid to Jonson as he proceeds, and the extent to which this attention is manifested as public spectacle. At Royston, the companion notes, 'the maids and young men came out of town to meet us', while at Caxton, 'we were met with oyez'; at Bottesford, meanwhile, they were waylaid by 'an honest parson' who 'made us taste of all the ale thereabouts' (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, pp. 42 and 46). On their arrival at York, 'we were no sooner housed but diverse came to see and welcome us', and in Durham 'the waits and cornets came to our lodging' (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, pp. 67 and 74). A salute of artillery and church bells welcomed them to Berwick upon Tweed, while at their departure from that town they were accompanied by 'all the knights, gentlemen, mayor and aldermen' (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, pp. 84-85). Once in Scotland, they were treated to an extraordinary greeting at North Berwick on 16 September:

Wednesday, Sir John Humes told my gossip that his shearers [i.e. agricultural labourers] had made a great suit to him to have a sight of him. So he walked up into the fields, where was a number of them with a bagpipe, who no sooner saw my gossip, but they circled him and danced round about him. (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders, p. 88)

Their arrival at Edinburgh was enthusiastically marked the next afternoon, as ‘the woman in throngs ran to see us etc., some bringing sack and sugar, others aquavita and sugar, etc.’ But this was just the prelude to a more formal entry into the city undertaken the following morning, in which both the civic and the popular fused in further spectacle:

On Friday all these gentlemen with others of the town brought my gossip to the high cross, and there on their knees drank the king’s health, testifying in that place that he had performed his journey. My gossip also drank to the bailiff and aldermen and the whole people their health, they being so thick in the street that we could scarce pass by them, they ran in such throngs to have a sight of my gossip. The windows also being full, everyone peeping out of a round hole like a head out of a pillory. (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, pp. 89-90)

The seemingly smooth unfolding of this particular event contrasts with perhaps the most striking instance of public celebration encountered by Jonson and his companion earlier in their journey, when their welcome at Pontefract appears to have been a much rowdier affair:

We lay at Mr Tatham’s, an alderman, to whose house we came the back way because all the town was up in throngs to see us. And there was dancing of giants, and music prepared to meet us. And notwithstanding we took a byway to escape the crowd and staring of the people yet a swarm of boys and others crossed over to overtake us, and pressed so upon us, that we were fain to present our pistols upon them to keep them back, and made them believe we would shoot them to get passage etc. (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, p. 63)

Entertaining as these vignettes are, they present an interpretative challenge for scholars of early modern literary culture. The account itself is in stylistic terms a fairly

unadorned piece of writing, so it is not clearly in conformity with the conventions and expectations of any established genre. However, it does demonstrate a kinship with some other narrative accounts of spectacular events of the time. In Jonson's arrival at Edinburgh there is a minor echo, for instance, of Thomas Dekker's narrative of the formal entry into London of James VI and I at his coronation in 1604. In *The Magnificent Entertainment*, Dekker describes the 'thronged streetes' in a way that pays similar attention to the watching crowds:

The Streets seemd to be paved with men: Stalles in steade of rich wares were set out with children, open Casements fild up with wemen.

All Glasse windows taken downe, but in their places, sparkled so many eyes, that had it not beene the day, the light which reflected from them, was sufficient to have made one. (Dekker 1604, sig. B4v)

Jonson had been preceded on this journey by King James in 1617, and his own voyage certainly makes sense as an homage to his monarch and patron, an imitation of a royal progress. The work which in form and content more extensively prefigures the narrative of Jonson's 'Foot Voyage' is *Kemps Nine Daies Wonder*, the account written by the comic actor Will Kemp of his morris dance, in stages, from London to Norwich in the summer of 1600 (Kemp 1600). As Anna Groundwater, Julie Sanders and I have discussed in more detail elsewhere, the same language of crowds, throngs, and of difficulties 'getting passage' are found in Kemp; the *Nine Daies Wonder* also details Kemp's greeting from 'the dyvers voyces of the young men and Maydens, which I should meete at everie myles end, thronging by twentie and sometimes fortie' (sig. D1), and a doubled entry into Norwich, just as Jonson and his companion received both an informal and a formal welcome into Edinburgh (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, pp. 128-131).

The fact that the recorded details of the ‘Foot Voyage’ chime both with a royal entry and a comic actor’s antic dance might be thought problematic, even though – as Daryl Palmer has argued – Kemp’s tale appropriates the form and language of a royal progress (Palmer 1992, p. 132), and is keen to insist on its own and its performer’s difference from both low balladry and the criminal errancy of rogues and vagabonds (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, p. 130). The kinship is less surprising than might at first appear, though, if account is taken of the generic affiliations not of the ‘Foot Voyage’ but of the walk which it records. Kemp’s journey was itself a precedent – a feat undertaken in the public eye, a journey accomplished according to certain enabling (or perhaps, disabling) conditions, often underpinned by a wager on its completion. Kemp chose to dance his way from London to Norwich; Jonson’s contemporary, the popular writer and Thames waterman John Taylor, undertook a similar journey to Scotland the same summer, though by a different route, and pledged to do so without spending money, relying instead on the hospitality and kindness of strangers (Taylor 1618). Jonson himself noted some of these precedents – including Kemp – in a poem first published in 1616, recalling

those that put out moneys on return  
 From Venice, Paris or some inland passage  
 Of six times to and fro without embassy,  
 Or him that backward went to Berwick, or which  
 Did dance the famous morris unto Norwich (Jonson 2012, p. 192; ‘Famous Voyage’, pp. 31-36)

These references occur in a mock-heroic work describing a grisly boat trip through the London sewers, a comically ‘famous voyage’ to which they are belittlingly compared. Another of the precedents here is Thomas Coryate, the ‘Odcombian legstretcher’, an

adventurer whose journeys through continental Europe and beyond – often, but not always, on foot – were written up and published in *Coryats Crudities* in 1611. Jonson was one of many who contributed ostensibly commendatory verses to the volume.

The most important thing to note is that Jonson's precedents, whether royal progress or the morris dance, are all 'famous voyages' – they are not just journeys undertaken for their own sake, or even with a destination primarily in view, but precisely as public spectacle. If we are to make sense of Jonson's own escapade, we must see it in this light. As the many moments noted above testify, it was performed before a diverse – and often large and enthusiastic – audience, and the nature and extent of that audience is integral to the kind of event that this is. If this, too, was a 'famous voyage' then what kind of fame was here on show? How significant is it that Jonson was known – both to his contemporaries and to us – as an emphatically serious writer, an author worthy of comparison to classical exemplars such as Martial and Horace? He was not a pamphleteer like Taylor, nor a public eccentric like Coryate, and emphatically not a stage clown like Kemp. We need to find the means to make sense of the 'fame' of Jonson's voyage, and what his willing involvement in the creation and sustenance of such a spectacle can tell us both about him and about literary renown in seventeenth century England.

Not only has Jonson's sustained interest in fame long been a topic of literary critical interest, but it also features prominently in Leo Braudy's canonical account of the Western idea of fame (Braudy 1986, esp. pp. 321-326). As Ian Donaldson has recently emphasised, Jonson's explicit engagement with the issue extends at least from the satire *Poetaster* in 1600 to the masque *Chloridia* thirty-one years later (2011, pp. 304-307). In this engagement, Jonson takes his bearings from ideas of fame commonplace in the Renaissance – those of Cesare Ripa's celebrated *Iconologia*, cited in the *Masque of Queens*, for example, or Virgil's account in Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, which is quoted at length in *Poetaster* (Jonson 2012, 3: pp.



320-321; 2: pp. 139-141). These depictions, crucially, allow for the moral and social dubiety of fame to be fully captured, 'Fama Bona' being quite capable of shifting into the more dangerous or difficult figure of rumour, who in turn – as Donaldson points out – is not too far from 'slander, blame, reproach, disgrace, dishonour' (2011, p. 304). Indeed, in his figuration of good Fame in *The Masque of Queens*, Jonson nonetheless borrows details from Virgil's rather more disturbing or ambivalent portrayal of this emblematic figure.

This awareness of fame's dangers is a pervasive issue in Jonson's writing. Concerns with the threatening power of libel are as sustained as, and clearly coeval with, his interest in the more positive possibilities of fame. They emerge strongly, again, in *Poetaster*, are a prominent topic of his 'Dedicatory Epistle' to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge prefixed to the quarto edition of *Volpone* in 1607, and are still finding expression in the same terms as late as *The Magnetic Lady* in 1632 (Cain 1998; Loxley and Robson 2013, pp. 54-55). The poetic and dramatic exploration of libel even spilled over into Jonson's writerly life, when he found himself imprisoned in 1605 'for writing something against the Scots' (Jonson 2012, 5: p. 373; 'Informations', pp. 207-208) in *Eastward Ho*. The letters he wrote from prison to influential courtiers capable of influencing his fate rehearse phrases and ideas that echo *Poetaster*, and that the 'Dedicatory Epistle' with which he prefaced the quarto publication of *Volpone* puts to new and more public uses, as Jonson protests his innocence of the crimes – forms of libel, interestingly enough – of which he is accused. As the 'Epistle' says:

It is not rumour can make men guilty, much less entitle me to other men's crimes. I know that nothing can be so innocently writ or carried but may be made obnoxious to construction. Marry, while I bear mine innocence about me, I fear it not. (Jonson 2012, p. 29; *Volpone*, 'Epistle', pp. 46-49)

Here, Jonson's characteristic response to the perils of rumour and libel is crisply articulated. Although his words might be capable of being used against him, and his character thus blackened and impugned by rumour, he will nonetheless remain impervious to its insidious effects. His innocence is his shield, protecting him and his vulnerable words from the corrosions of bad fame; he must demonstrate, as he puts it in one of his prison letters and in *Poetaster*, 'the asinine virtue, Patience' (i.e., the virtue associated with the donkey or ass: Jonson 2012, 2: p. 646. Cf Jonson 2012, 2: p. 145; *Poetaster*, 5.3. pp. 82-83). And if this is not going to be enough to save him in this life, then his only resort is to entrust his reputation to a salvific future, as his letter to Thomas Howard, Earl of Suffolk, suggests:

And I appeal to posterity that will hereafter read and judge my writings, though now neglected, whether it be possible I should speak of His Majesty as I have done without the affection of a most zealous and good subject. (Jonson 2012, p. 644)

The hope, then, is that the virtue of patience will have its reward in a 'hereafter' that will redeem Jonson from both neglect and false accusation.

Jonson's relationship with his readers and audiences, and the way in which his own reputation is vulnerable to damage arising from their misprision or misreading, is a focus not just for the 'Dedicatory Epistle' of *Volpone* but also shapes the prologues, epilogues, inductions, choruses, and commentaries of plays from *Cynthia's Revels* down to *The Magnetic Lady*. It is a topic, too, for a number of the epigrams he places towards the front of the collection published in the 1616 *Works*, and for later poems included in the posthumously published *Underwood*. Moreover, in several instances he makes the failure of his work to find acceptance a structuring feature of its publication, marking the work itself with the

contexts and occasions of its reception by a troublesome or unworthy audience. The ‘Apologetical Dialogue’ appended to *Poetaster* brings the author on stage to defend his play and his reputation, counter-balancing the personification of Envy with which it begins; *The New Inn* was famously published in quarto with Jonson’s ‘Ode to Himself’, angrily renouncing the stage after the failure of the play in performance – a failure the edition thus trumpets and memorialises. The dedications to the Inns of Court, Richard Martin, Lord D’Aubigny, Sir Francis Stuart, and the Earl of Pembroke in the 1616 *Works* explicitly reference the difficult receptions that the works dedicated either received on their first appearance or might now expect.

In the face of such deliberate and insistent revisiting of the entwined issues of reception and reputation, the defiant but ultimately passive posture that Jonson adopts in some of his comments about the problem of fame looks less convincing. In her account of the Jonsonian imagination of envy, Lynn Meskill argues that ‘Jonson’s writings are marked by a *rhetoric of discontinuity* in which the creation and production of text is, in part, catalyzed by rupture in response to the perceived appearance of an invidious gaze’ (2009, pp. 7-8). This is a writer propelled by the possibility, even, of the kind of harsh or unfair judgement – ill fame – which puts his own reputation at risk. It is a rather more dynamic image than the shielded, patient or martyred poet of the prison letters, and a rather less defensive representation than the wronged and angry author of the ‘Dedicatory Epistle’. As Meskill says:

Like other writers of the period, Jonson shows himself to be extremely conscious of the risks involved in the performance of his plays or in sending his text into the world where it would meet the gaze of strangers, rather than just friends, many of whom did not share the same values or the same education as himself. Yet, he willingly accepted this risk and in doing so invested in the means of camouflaging and protecting his work at every turn.  
(p. 25)

So for Meskill, Jonson's energies are expended in summoning up and responding to the invidious spectator or reader who both provokes him into writerly action and cannot, ultimately, be overcome. His 1616 *Works* becomes a way of forging a monument within which he might hope to shield himself from this difficult attention, with the problem then becoming his persistence beyond this laboured creation – hence, as she argues in relation to his later play *The Staple of News*, 'one is confronted with fragments and pieces from the 1616 monument which in turn serve as the new authorities with which to appease the envious gaze of the future spectator and reader' (p. 204).

This kind of reading is broadly continuous with other critical attempts to account for Jonson's investment in print. It is also in line with efforts to make sense of his apparent efforts to ward off or repudiate the ill fame that traps him, and is both cause and effect of the misprision to which he and his works are subject. Meskill follows Joseph Loewenstein (2002) and Timothy Murray (1987) in seeing Jonson's apparent suspicion of spectacle and audience, and his cultivation of an ideal, 'understanding' reader of his works in print, as components of this strategy. Quite early in his career, Loewenstein argues, Jonson 'had plainly begun to regard publication as a fortress from which self-defense could be mounted' (p. 146); yet this approach itself required further retrenchment and refinement, as Jonson's framing of his printed works continued to display his particularly 'morbid sense of the fragility of an author's *semantic* control over published work' (Loewenstein 2002, p. 199). Jonson's assertion of his authorial status is an ultimately futile attempt to resist not only the reader's interpretative claims, but also the potentially mistaken judgement *of Jonson himself* that the reader will form as part of this process. As he puts it in his epigram 'To My Book':

It will be looked for, book, when some but see

Thy title, 'Epigrams', and named of me,  
Thou shouldst be bold, licentious, full of gall,  
Wormwood, and sulphur; and toothed withal... (Jonson 2012, 5: p. 113; 'To My Book',  
pp. 1-4)

Despite his encomia to good fame, it seems that Jonson's own experience of the workings of writerly reputation is far more often negative, or actually dangerous, than otherwise. Fame, for him, is something to be feared and fought against. But his persistent authorial self-assertions, ironically, serve only to expose him to further misapprehension both of his works and himself. There is something tragicomic, perhaps, about this figure – adrift on currents made more injurious by his attempts to control them. The fact that this is how posterity, at least in the form of literary critical assessments, should see him only intensifies the irony.

Yet it is hard to see this image of Jonson as a defensive author doggedly, if unsuccessfully, grappling with ill fame as entirely compatible with the figure revealed in the 'Foot Voyage'. The customary approach, following Jonson's own sources in associating popular and audience response with misreading, ignorance or slander, leaves little room for the kind of occasions we find documented in the account. Indeed, its details point beyond the familiar early modern conceptions of fame within which Jonsonian self-display has hitherto been explored to indicate the relevance of notions of celebrity instead. The temptation to invoke the notion of celebrity, though, is not without its difficulties. While it is customary to suggest that this is a quintessentially modern phenomenon, a number of scholars have in recent years been engaged not just in undertaking archaeological or genealogical explorations of its origins (see, for an example, Rojek 2014), but have argued that celebrity itself is to be found in much earlier periods of Western history, at least. Simon Morgan (2011) has made a case for discerning celebrity cultures in the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries; the editors of the *PMLA* special issue on celebrity the same year listed a range of works which explore the

specific instance of literary celebrity in periods reaching back to the mid-eighteenth century (Boone and Vickers 2011, p. 905). Fred Inglis' *Short History of Celebrity* suggests that 'the image of celebrity [was] first adumbrated in 1770s London' (2010, p. 6); Tom Mole has influentially traced the genesis of celebrity to the Romantic period, which in his account saw the emergence of an *apparatus* – Mole's primarily Foucauldian term – which made it possible for the first time (2007, p. 6). For Mole, celebrity culture is the conjunction of an industry defined by the technological reproducibility of the cultural commodity, an individual whose subjectivity is to some extent remade through the circulation and consumption of such commodities, and an audience to be understood as 'massive, anonymous, socially diverse, [and] geographically distributed' (2007, p. 3). Mole's insistence on this historical moment of genesis puts him at odds with those, like Richard Shickel, who have assumed that 'there was no such thing as celebrity prior to the beginning of the twentieth century' (Mole 2007, p. 6; Shickel 2000, p. 23), and provides further support for those inclined to insist the concept has value in the analysis of earlier historical moments. But at the same time, the suggestion that this apparatus as a whole was unprecedented precludes the projection of this analytic work back beyond Romanticism.

That the conditions invoked by Mole come together in that precise form only in the Romantic period is a case he makes persuasively. Indeed, there has been some reluctance to speak of celebrity as a meaningful term in accounts of sixteenth and seventeenth century literary culture. However, Elizabeth Skerpan-Wheeler (2011) has undertaken an analysis of the 'celebrity' of Charles I, and Alexandra Halasz argued some years ago that the circulation of Richard Tarlton's memory, image and name could and should be read as an instance of celebrity culture (Halasz 1995). Both these accounts mobilise conceptions of industry and audience, focused primarily on the reproduction and circulation of the commodities of the print and the book. (Since they are dealing with posthumous celebrity, neither is in a position

to say much about the individual.) So it is not completely obvious that an analytical extension of the notion of an apparatus of celebrity to the lifetime of an early modern author such as Jonson is necessarily doomed to failure, since there may be continuities in the idea and actuality of industry and audience which are worth attending to – indeed, such a notion may help to make sense of aspects of the record that are difficult to accommodate within existing interpretative frameworks. And if we can make sense of these events in this way, then perhaps our wider account of Jonson’s seemingly fraught encounters with his own fame might prove susceptible to revision.

Like Mole, Boone and Vickers offer several postulates on the broader application of the concept and language of celebrity in their *PMLA* essay. Within these they sketched three broad and complementary dimensions of the phenomenon – that ‘celebrity demands a gaze’, that ‘celebrities perform’, and that ‘celebrity resides in the public sphere’ (p. 907). While these are indeed broad in outline, Boone and Vickers refine them in explication – the ‘constituting gaze’ implies, necessarily, ‘the primacy of the visible’: that celebrity is a matter of seeing and being seen even if any individual’s celebrity arises from something other than the circulation of an image. By the same token, the insistence that celebrities perform allows Boone and Vickers to assert the significance of theatre and theatricality to the history and development of this phenomenon – that there is, in other words, a sense in which celebrity can be illuminated by concepts of performance and performativity (see also Luckhurst and Moody 2005). The claim that celebrity functions within the public sphere provides it with another form of historical and analytical anchorage. For while debates over the nature and genealogy of the public sphere are longstanding, the socio-cultural developments of early modernity – perhaps as such a designation implies – have canonically been identified with the creation of its formative conditions in a way that perhaps aligns with Braudy’s own grand narrative of the development of fame. While Habermas himself associated the emergence of

the public sphere with social changes that postdate Jonson's life, other scholars have queried this temporal restriction. Halasz (1997, pp. 162-203), to name only one key contributor to the discussion, has argued that the English pamphlet culture of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries testifies to the existence of something worthy of the name in that place and time, even if it does not conform to the overly schematic model presented by Habermas himself. Indeed, if Habermas sees the advent of celebrity – as Mole notes – as an element in the disintegration of the 'classical' public sphere, in part because it marks its colonisation by the market, then a less tidy account of its development can accommodate such disintegrative forces at earlier stages in its history (Habermas 1989, pp. 141-180; Mole 2007, p. 5).

Why, then, might we want to bring the notion of celebrity to bear on Jonson's walk? Perhaps most pertinently, the kinship between Jonson's journey and the 'famous voyages' of Will Kemp and John Taylor, in particular, suggests a different place for the popular gaze of an undifferentiated audience than is revealed in his many paratextual assertions of wounded response to the neglect or mistreatment of a vulgar, spectatorial multitude. Despite the public safety problems encountered at Pontefract, the 'Foot Voyage' provides evidence of what looks like genuine popular enthusiasm for the travelling poet on several occasions. While it is impossible to know exactly what motivated such responses – what, for example, compelled the dancing shearers of North Berwick to receive him in such a manner – they are an indication that Jonson was a sufficiently notable figure to warrant these effusive greetings. The echoes of a royal progress in Jonson's journey – most obviously visible and audible in the peal of bells and military salute with which he was welcomed to Berwick, but also generally discernible in the emphasis on his availability to a public gaze – further support the case. There is an alignment of the popular and the elite – the formal or ceremonial welcomes that he receives from nobility, gentry and civic elites are complemented by the more informal attentions of crowds, presses and throngs, just like Kemp in his jig and the king in his



progress. These crowds are not the ill-informed, unappreciative spectators of which Jonson complains elsewhere. They appear both to understand the public nature of the walk, and to be willing to play their part in confirming the status of the figure at its centre.

What then of Jonson himself? In her account of Tarlton's celebrity, Halasz emphasises that our access to evidence of his status is found in the printing, reprinting and circulation of pamphlets, ballads and jest books after his death. Tarlton's celebrity, in other words, is confirmed by the persistence of his currency beyond his lifetime, and by the investment made by others – stationers, for the most part – in sustaining the value of his image (1995, 27). With Jonson the situation is very different. Indeed, to recall Mole's *apparatus*, Jonson adds the component of the individual to industry and audience. As the 'Foot Voyage' demonstrates, Jonson himself was implicated in the creation of the spectacle surrounding him. As celebrities must, he performed. If, as Rojek asserts, 'celebrity may be defined as the accumulation of attention capital via self-promotion and exposure management' (2014, p. 456), then Jonson's own behaviour, insofar as it can be gleaned from the sometimes frustratingly elliptical prose of the account, fits the bill. To undertake this walk at all was clearly an act of self-promotion – had he wished merely to visit Edinburgh or Scotland he could have travelled unobtrusively, as most other voyagers did, riding or going by sea. To promise, publicly, to walk all the way made it a feat, the progress and completion of which could hardly fail to be a public event, as the welcoming crowds at Edinburgh demonstrate. To drink the health of 'the whole people' there, as the account notes, shows Jonson acknowledging the presence of these crowds, welcoming and reciprocating their attention at the moment when the formal completion of his journey is publicly confirmed. Jonson, then, would appear to be a conscious and willing participant in the accumulation of attention capital achieved by his spectacular journey. Popular reputation is not something unfailingly threatening that he is keen either to rise above or to combat, but a vital moment in

the exposure to public view he was seeking, in his progress, to further and to manage. His suspicion that John Taylor's 'penniless pilgrimage' to Edinburgh had been meant as a parody of his own pedestrian adventure – confided to William Drummond some months later – shows that he was alert to the reputational possibilities and risks he was courting (Jonson 2012, 5: p. 388; 'Informations', p. 486).

There are other moments in the account that hint at exactly this kind of self-conscious courting and crafting of attention – a confidence, perhaps, in his ability to manage exposure. The performance of generosity is one consistent thread running through the 'Foot Voyage': at Buntingford, Jonson 'contributed two pieces to the newly erected chapel', at the postmaster's house at Witham, 'the gentlewoman would give no reckoning, but the bounty of my gossip made it dearer than an inn', while up the road at Belvoir castle 'my gossip gave to the lowest scullion in the house half a crown' (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, pp. 42 and 44-45). At Staunton Grange, 'my gossip gave to the gentlewoman of the house a piece, to her daughter half a piece, and to every servant in the house two shillings'. Looking for drinking cups at a goldsmith's in Worksop, 'we met with one of a yard long, which we measured out in liquor with London measure [i.e. generously] to those that lighted in our company'. What is especially notable here is that this takes place not in a private house, but in the street. Similarly, in Newcastle, 'my gossip went to the free school and gave the master a piece to buy a book with' (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, pp. 46, 56 and 75). Most spectacularly, we find Jonson orchestrating his own festivities at Pontefract, the English town which, as noted above, had not only offered him the most elaborate public welcome but in which he received – possibly ceremonially – the gift of a buck from the Countess of Shrewsbury. As the account says, 'this night my gossip invited the whole town to his venison, and the wine came to 41s [i.e. shillings], which my gossip paid' (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, p. 64). 'The whole town' here refers, of course, to the civic

elite who had presumably been responsible for the formal staging of Jonson's reception, rather than a more expansive public, but the way in which Jonson seeks to reciprocate through orchestrating a ceremonial occasion of his own would seem to be revelatory of his deft handling of the business of exposure management. The performance at the Mercat Cross in Edinburgh's High Street is then the climactic scene in a lengthy theatrical journey stretching across more than two months and 400 miles. And rather than being a merely shadowy or absent author of this spectacle, at one remove from its realisation through bodies and spaces, Jonson is at its heart. This is to echo the consistent self-presentation as author – the intrusion of an authorial figure or representative into the performance – that we see in his plays. In offering himself up to the gaze of an audience, Jonson effectively makes himself an actor or performer – and in so doing compounds the fame he derives from his writing with that generated within stage performance. And actors, of course, as the focus of spectacle, are rightly understood as a vehicle for the workings of celebrity in what some have suggested is its original form (Luckhurst and Moody 2005; Inglis 2010, pp. 37-73).

Further indications of Jonson's investment in such performative practices can be found in some of his surviving works from this year. 'A Grace by Ben Jonson Extempore Before King James' is known from nine extant manuscript copies, all but one seventeenth century, and can be dated between January 1617 and March 1619 (Jonson 2012, 5: pp. 346-347). While the textual history of the poem suggests that it was adaptable and adapted to a range of different occasions and audiences (not all of them, *pace* the usual title, requiring the king's presence), it is likely that it gained additional exposure on Jonson's walk. The 'Foot Voyage' notes two occasions on which Jonson proposed the king's health at dinner, firstly at Sir William Cavendish's residence at Welbeck Abbey, and then – rather more publicly, even though dinner in a country house would in no modern sense have been a 'private' occasion – at the table of the Bishop of Durham (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, pp. 58 and

73). The poem ‘To Mr Ben Jonson in his Journey by Mr Craven’, preserved in a single manuscript with ‘Mr Ben Jonson’s Answer of the Sudden’, also demonstrates Jonson’s willingness to make an authorial spectacle of himself (Jonson 2012, 5: p. 349). A further trace to note is the poem eventually printed as ‘My Picture Left in Scotland’, an ecphrastic self-portrait which Jonson appears to have presented to two of his hosts, William Drummond and Sir William Cavendish (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, p. 158). Despite the title of the version presented to Cavendish, ‘Verses on his Picture’, there is no evidence that the poem refers to an actual painting or engraving, though it is far from impossible that it might. Here, regardless, is another indication of Jonson’s alertness to, and ease with, the currency of his image.

So the celebrated figure we meet in the ‘Foot Voyage’ is starkly at odds with the often threatened author, retreating from audience to readers and then, at last, to a small elite of patron-readers, that we find so often given voice in the texts and – especially – paratexts of his printed works. What might we make of this difference? It’s worth noting that Jonson can be more accepting of popular reception than his frequent invocation of ill fame attests. The first ‘Prologue’ published with *Epicene* in the 1616 folio, for instance, invokes Terence to mount a defence of the poetic aim of pleasing an audience:

Truth says, of old the art of making plays  
 Was to content the people, and their praise  
 Was to the poet money, wine and bays.  
 But in this age a sect of writers are  
 That only for particular likings care,  
 And will taste nothing that is popular.  
 With such we mingle neither brains nor breasts;  
 Our wishes, like to those make public feasts,  
 Are not to please the cook’s tastes, but the guests’. (Jonson 2012, 3: p. 390; *Epicene*,  
 ‘Prologue’, pp. 1-9)

What is significant here is not just the openness to the idea of ‘content[ing] the people’, but the likeness of the consumption of plays to participation in the kind of ‘public feasts’ with which Jonson’s walk to Edinburgh was punctuated.

But such expansive moments are rare enough to leave the substantive issue intact. The journey recorded in the ‘Foot Voyage’ is not in itself the central instantiation of Jonsonian celebrity – it is a product, reflection and refraction of a kind of renown established elsewhere, within the culture industries of print and playhouse where his performance of injured authorship is so often encountered. Together with the evidence of Jonson’s popular reception on his walk, though, and his conscious adoption of particular performative strategies or moves while at the centre of the popular gaze, they perhaps point to a more complex approach to his own stores of attention capital. Mole’s account of the ‘particularly acute fashion’ in which ‘the celebrity experiences the subjective trauma of commodity capitalism’ is pertinent here:

The celebrity individual enters a feedback loop in which being a celebrity affects his or her self-understanding, so that neither self nor celebrity can be conceptually quarantined from the other... He is both the producer of commodities and himself, in a sense, a commodity (2007, pp. 3-4).

Even if we accept, as we must, that Jonsonian and Romantic subjectivities cannot be identical, this account of the celebrity’s ‘self-alienation’ (Mole 2007, p. 4) nevertheless helps delineate something of Jonson’s own ‘feedback loop’.

It is interesting, in particular, that Mole should speak here of ‘trauma’. Most critics see Jonson’s relation to his public reputation as similarly fraught – as almost, if not actually,

pathological. Joseph Loewenstein, for example, has written of Jonson's 'eerie compulsion to self-exposure', as if his encounters with his public were beyond his capacities for self-curation (2002, p. 155). It is certainly true that self-exposure is meat and drink to Jonson – as we might expect of someone happy to pen and circulate not one but two 'odes to himself' (Jonson 2012, 6: pp. 310-313, 7: p. 133). But this only looks 'compulsive' if we take Jonson's posture of angry defensiveness in the face of public hostility at face value, as if his exposure was – strictly speaking – unmanageable or subjectively disintegrative. If, however, we view this posture and persona through the lens of the 'Foot Voyage', we can perhaps begin to view it in a different aspect. The *content* of Jonson's angry 'Ode to Himself' is in many ways at odds with the publication of such a poem alongside the text of the play whose failure in performance it apparently laments – there is something clearly odd in publishing a poem for which one's self is the primary audience in the first place. In fact, of course, the self here is necessarily and already public property – it is a recognisable image, held up to provoke the very responses from a wider public that it claims to disdain. In this, at least, it was successful: a number of contemporaries took up the challenge, and despite its print publication the poem still survives in sixteen manuscript copies, nearly all of them early or mid-seventeenth century in date. To talk of compulsion here – to identify such performances of authorial attitude with the real psychological dispositions of a singular Ben Jonson – is precisely not to see him through the lens of celebrity, or rather to accept the promise of personal immediacy or intimacy that celebrity repeatedly stages. But to see it through this lens requires us to approach these self-displays of authorial disdain as *work* – as writerly labour in the creation of reputational value. The literary celebrity, thus conceived, remains in some ways at odds with her or himself – divided across different locations of selfhood, both the writer and the written – but this is not necessarily sheer malfunction, nor the trauma of

which Mole speaks in his account. The refusal or rejection of celebrity is a move in the workings of celebrity itself, a *generative* trope rather than an impediment.

In essence this is about the productive as well as destructive power of mediation, and the relevance and importance of that power to an understanding of 'Ben Jonson' – tellingly, of course, the familiar or intimate name he gave himself, and by which we still know him. Boone and Vickers point to 'the myriad ways in which celebrity thrives in, and is negotiated through, a middle ground that is brought into being between producers and consumers of culture who, in negotiating this space, create and define one another' (p. 905). What we see in Jonson's work is an author continually playing off his own reputation, recognising the terms in which it is returned to him through the circulation of his writing. It is commodified on the stage, and in print; but Jonson is aware too that he is himself commodified along with it, circulated as 'the author' within his works. His authorial persona frequently displays his apparent hurt or anger in the face of such processes, but this kind of response is precisely what his audience expects of him. His epigram 'To My Book', as I noted above, explicitly acknowledges his reputation for 'gall', the unattractive (but perhaps compelling) personal traits or humours he is deemed to demonstrate in his writing. The Ben Jonson who acknowledges this, who makes so much of his own reputation within his own works, is effectively recirculating it. He is accelerating the process, not trying to apply the brake.

Through the record of the 'Foot Voyage', Jonson's walk can be read as showing us this 'middle ground' in particularly acute fashion, the 'dynamic interaction of charisma and fascination' that is 'the constituting site of celebrity' (Boone and Vickers, p. 905). One incident along the way reveals this particularly vividly. Left in charge of Sir William Cavendish's house at Welbeck, Jonson took it upon himself to inhabit the role of generous host with plenty of gusto:

On Sunday my gossip reigned wholly and gave entertainment to all comers. The officers came to know his pleasure and what he would command. Diverse gentlemen dined with him; Mr Steward with other gentlemen would not be persuaded to sit but wait. (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, p. 54)

The wine cellar was ‘thrown open’, a buck was killed on his command, and local gentlemen were appointed – festively, temporarily – to offices in Jonson’s ‘household’. The performance continued even when Sir William’s wife and mother returned to Welbeck. As the account puts it:

Presently ... the ladies came, whom Mr Jonson welcomed to his house, and at supper bid them want nothing, for if they did it was not his fault. Chafed at the table for lights, and checked the waiters because there was no more new bread, which freedom of his mingled with a great deal of mirth much delighted the ladies. (Loxley, Groundwater and Sanders 2015, p. 57)

Here, Jonson’s performance as host has shifted key slightly – it is now a show of irascibility, of impatience at his household officers, of irritability. This is ill-tempered, ungentle Ben, the author who complains elsewhere of being calumniated in exactly this fashion. But this display is aimed at provoking the ‘delight’ – the laughter, the fascination – of his audience. It is Jonson’s charisma, his capacity to evoke mirth, that guarantees him this ‘freedom’, and that ensures its continuance. And what is true of the middle ground revealed in this vignette is equally true, in turn, of the theatre and the printed book. They are just as much the locations for this kind of conjunction. In repeatedly returning to both places in order to complain about his fame, to put on a show of vulnerability and irritability, Jonson is accruing and renewing



his celebrity rather than spurning the processes from which – as he surely knows – his name derives its value.

### **Notes on contributor:**

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